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ABSTRACT

Since there has been little research in the area of children in long-term foster care, it is not clear how these children differ from those who successfuly move out of care. A study was undertaken to discover which factors account for the phenomenon of long-term foster care. Four organizations were involved: (1) private social services agency (research group); (2) State Department of Children and Youth Services (study population); (3) a university school of social work (project co-leadership); and (4) the state chapter of a national organization of volunteers (subject interviews). To involve policymakers in this project, the evaluators scheduled meetings with administrators of regional offices to receive their ideas, suggestions, and commitment that findings would be used in their policy decision-making. To involve state social workers in the projects, evaluators met the social workers face-to-face in friendly meetings, made the social workers' role an active rather than a passive one, solicited interview items of personal significance, attempted to instill curiosity about results, stressed previous successful projects completed together, and read a project endorsement statement from the social workers' central office. These efforts resulted in a project in which the workers, on the whole, were cooperative and gave thoughtful responses to the questions. (NB)

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SETTING THE STAGE FOR USE OF RESULTS BY PRACTITIONERS AND POLICYMAKERS

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Abstract

Setting the Stage for Use of Results by

Practitioners and Policymakers

In recent years increasing attention has been paid to the importance of planning for permanency for all children removed from their homes. In the United states, there are currently over 100,000 children who have been in foster care for at least two years. Since there has been little research in this area, it is not clear how this group of children differ from those who successfuly move out of care.

A study supported by the Administration of Children, Youth, and Families of the Department of Health and Human Services, was undertaken to discover which factors account for the phenomenon of long-term foster care. It represented a combined effort of four organizations: a private social services agency as the research group, the State Department of Childen and Youth Services for the study population, the school of social work at a large university for project co-leadership, and the state chapter of a national organization of volunteers for subject interviews.

This paper describes how practitioners and policymakers in the child welfare system were involved from the beginning of the research project, and particularly how the groundwork was laid for their eventual use of study findings in the decision-making process.

Setting the Stage for Use of Results

by Practitioners and Policymakers

In recent years increasing attention has been paid to the importance of planning for permanency for all children removed from their homes. In the United States, there are currently over 100,000 children and youth who have been in foster care for at least two years. In Connecticut alone, there are approximately 800 such children. Few of these children are reunited with their families or adopted and most of them remain in extended foster care until emancipation. Although the use of long-term foster care is controversial, there is some movement toward recognition of permanent foster family care as a sound plan for some youngsters, such as older children with significant ties to their biological parents that should be maintained.

Since there has been little research in this area, it is not clear how this group of children differs from those who successfully move out of care. Is it that the children are more difficult to plan for; or that their family situations are more complicated so that return to biological homes or termination of parental rights is not feasible; or that case planning and case management are prevented from being carried out for these children? Are their characteristics and those of their families related to the length of their stay in foster care?

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A study supported by the Administration of Children, Youth, and Families of the Department of Health and Human Services, was undertaken to discover which of these factors, alone or in combination account for the phenomenon of long-term foster care.[1] It represented a combined effort of four organizations: Child & Family Services as a research

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group, the Connecticut Department of Children and Youth Services (DCYS) for the study population, the University of Connecticut School of Social Work for project co-leadership, and the seven Junior Leagues of Connecticut, who are doing most of the foster parent interviews.

This paper describes how practitioners and policymakers in the child welfare system were involved from the beginning of the research project, and particularly how the groundwork was laid for their eventual use of study findings in the decision-making process.

Background

Long-term foster care has been receiving increased attention in recent years as permanency planning becomes an important issue for all children removed, or at risk of removal, from their homes. Permanency planning has been defined as the systematic process of carrying out, within a brief time-limited period, a set of goal-directed activities designed to help children live in families that offer continuity of relationships with nurturing parents or caretakers and the opportunity to establish lifetime relationships (Maluccio and Fein, 1983). The Connecticut Department of Children and Youth Services, which provided the study population, is committed to implementing permanency planning. In addition, their Five Year Master Rolling Plan states that policy planning will be based on research and evaluation.

Present Study

As part of setting the stage for the use of results, the area of study selected should be one of timely interest to practitioners and

policymakers. The more practice related a study is, the more likely it is that findings will be used. The present study fulfills this requirement.

Through interviews with foster parents and state social workers, this study seeks to discover what factors are associated with the large number of children in long-term foster care. A major objective of the research is to make practice and policy recommendations that will affect the plans and procedures of child welfare agencies involved in permanency planning.

As had been done in previous research and evaluation studies with the Connecticut Department of Children and Youth Services, a major effort was made to establish an effective working relationship between the research team and state agency. This involved meetings with key administrators as well as social workers at each of the regional offices. During these meetings, the evaluators conveyed respect for the jobs performed by administrators and social workers, an important ingredient for winning their participation and cooperation.

Meetings with administrators were scheduled as early as possible to receive their ideas, suggestions, and commitment that the findings would be used in their policy decision-making. Based on past research and evaluation efforts, it has been found that the more time spent initially in such meetings, the better the chance of gathering data that best meet the client's needs.

Previous experience has also shown that the state social workers are

more responsive to research procedures and demonstrate a greater likelihood of incorporating the findings into their practice when their involvement begins early in the process. Thus, meetings with the social workers in each of the regional offices were scheduled as quickly as possible, to familiarize them with the project. It was critical that their cooperation be obtained since interviews with social workers assigned long-term foster care caseloads were a major part of the study.

Because the social workers were sensitive to the perception that permanency planning views long-term foster care unfavorably, thus discounting the reality of the situations with which they must work, the meeting climate was often hostile. Their experience also associated research and evaluation teams in general with criticism of social work practice, more paperwork for the line worker, and irrelevant findings that do not change their work environment for the better. The following "disarmament" tactics were employed with varying degrees of success.

1. Personalizing the evaluator. By meeting face-to-face with the social workers, a layer of anonymity was removed. The evaluators became less threatening, thus resulting in a more cooperative atmosphere.

   The team always brought refreshments to the meetings in an attempt to make the encounter as friendly as possible. It also seemed that the smaller the physical distance between the evaluators and the social workers, the less hostility there appeared to be. If the group was small enough, the best

arrangement seemed to be sitting around a table. This allowed more eye contact and a feeling of "we're in this together." By personally meeting the evaluators, the social workers could associate the voice with a face when contacted for an interview, leading to less anonymity and greater cooperation.

2. Making the social workers' role active rather than passive. While it varied from region to region, very few social workers were positively excited or interested in the research. If not outwardly hostile, many sat passively in their chairs with a bored expression.

   In order to break the pattern, social workers were asked to give advice to the research team on various procedural questions about the study. Foster parent consent forms were also distributed during the meetings and social workers were asked to review them at that time. Any comments, no matter how negative, were met with encouragement by the evaluators and often led to further discussion. On occasion, one or a few social workers would be outspoken while the rest of the group looked on. The evaluators then attempted to address the remaining social workers by asking them if they also felt that way, in order to encourage others who had not already spoken to join in.

3. Soliciting interview items of personal significance. Based on previous experiences with research and evaluation that they are mandated to participate in, social workers typically report

that they derive little or no benefit following the study. Thus they view participation in studies as a waste of time and just another requirement that impinges on their direct service time. While there is no guarantee that study findings will result in policy changes that immediately affect line staff, there are some meaningful responses to this perception. In this instance, the research team solicited interview items from the social workers that the social workers felt would yield information directly useful in their case management. By including these in the interview, the social workers had information that they could then apply to their case management. Then if no practice or policy changes resulted from the findings, at least some results would be useful on a day-to-day basis.

4. Stirring up curiosity. There is no doubt that heavy caseloads, significant amounts of paperwork, and crowded offices contribute to social worker burnout. Their initial reaction to "another study" was less than enthusiastic. To counter this attitude, an attempt was made to instill curiosity about anticipated results. Social workers were asked to frame questions about foster care they had always wondered about, whether they pertained to foster parents or co-workers. If the query was met with complete silence, the research team waited for a response by a social worker. Once this occurred, others were likely to join in.

These questions were then incorporated into the interviews to generate greater interest in the study.

5. Stressing previous successful projects completed together. Social worker turnover is frequent and those who have been with DCYS for a while may not have participated in past studies involving Child & Family Services. Thus, a brief review of previous joint research endeavors was given, emphasizing areas where results were implemented by DCYS administrators.
6. Reading project endorsement statement. Despite the team's reassurances, many social workers were skeptical that their administrators would use the study findings to implement change. A memo written by a deputy commissioner was read at the meetings, stating the firm commitment by the central office to use of the evaluation findings in their practice and policy decision-making.

The underlying theme in the evaluators' relationship with practitioners and policymakers is that the project is a mutual undertaking that will provide meaningful and useful information. The theme is reinforced by:

- obtaining the support of the Commissioner for the study;
- designating liaisons at each of the regional offices to provide contact between the research team and social workers;
- keeping all informed of dates, times, when letters are being sent out, interviews scheduled, etc.;

- being sensitive to social worker time constraints, scheduling brief 10 minute interviews at their convenience;
- completing interim and final reports by promised deadlines, thus establishing credibility;
- planning for oral presentations of results to reach the widest audience;
- planning for wide dissemination of reports to administrators, social workers, respondents, and child advocacy organizations.

Update

Almost one year has passed since the study began. All the social worker interviews have been completed. On the whole, the workers were cooperative and gave thoughtful responses to the questions. Only a handful of workers (out of 200) were resistant and the liaison and/or supervisor had to be called in to resolve the problem.

The stage has now been set for the use of results by policymakers. In five months the impact of these preparations will be known as the report is written and the final act unfolds.

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